



HELP

ASK OUR TECHNICAL EXPERTS

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for help with software applications

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HELPFILE

System Restore doesn't work

Q I am unable to restore my computer to a previous restore point. I have no problem creating a new restore point but, each time I try to restore it, I get the message "Restoration Incomplete. No changes made". Can you throw any light on the problem?

Nicholas Dyer, dyernick@aol.com

A Each restore point that Windows System Restore creates contains a complete copy of the Registry files, plus copies of system files that have changed since the previous restore point was made. When Windows reverts to a previous restore point, it has to undo all the changes made since that point. This involves going through all the restore points in between to find out what it needs to change. If any of the files that should be in those restore points is missing or damaged, it refuses to restore.

Unfortunately, many anti-virus and anti-spyware programs search the System Volume Information folder where these restore points are held. They offer to delete any infected files they find in those restore point folders, but as soon as they delete any files, the restore point – and hence all the earlier restore points – becomes useless.

It's a pity that this messes up System Restore, as the missing files are often unimportant or, as in this case, totally useless and harmful. But System Restore doesn't know that this is the case and refuses to work.

There is still a way to perform at least a partial system restore. When you boot from Windows, it blocks access to the System Restore files, which are stored in the System Volume Information folder. But if you place your hard disk in another computer, or boot from a CD that contains an operating system that understands NTFS, you can access that folder. Professionals use a program called ERD Commander from Sysinternals.com to do this, while those on a budget rely on MiniPE or Hirem's Boot CD, which is available for download from many websites.

If you have a second logical drive letter on the computer, you can also create a second installation of Windows in that drive and boot from that to access the System Restore files. Finally, you can boot to the Recovery Console (see page 164) and use the method described in Microsoft KB article 307545 (<http://support.microsoft.com/?scid=307545>) to restore a default set of Registry files, and then copy the Registry from the date you want. However, this method is cumbersome, and it is much easier if you can boot from another drive.

When you boot from another operating system you should be able to view the System Volume Information folder. First, click on Tools, Folder Options and then click the View tab. Under this, select the option to Show Hidden files and folders, and clear the option to Hide protected operating system files. Once you have done this you should be able to click on the System Volume Information folder, even though it is still greyed out. If you still can't click on it, see Microsoft Knowledge Base article 309531 at

<http://support.microsoft.com/?scid=309531> for suggestions on how to access it.

Once you have access to the System Volume Information folder you will see one or more folders with long names such as _restore{87BD3667-3246-476B-923F-F86E30B3E7F8}. Click on each of these and you should see a number of folders called RP1, RP2 and so on. Select View Details and you will see the date on which each was last used. These are the restore points.

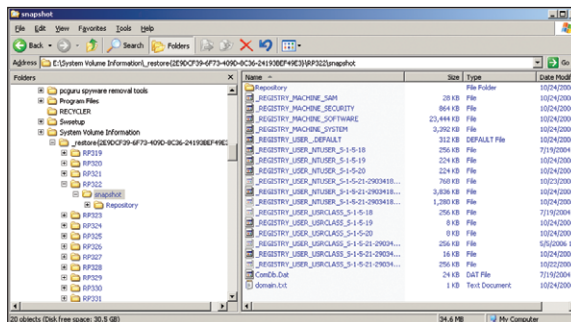
Choose a suitable date. Under each restore point folder you will see a folder called snapshot, which will contain a number of files including the following: _REGISTRY_USER_DEFAULT, _REGISTRY_MACHINE_SECURITY, _REGISTRY_MACHINE_SOFTWARE, _REGISTRY_MACHINE_SYSTEM and _REGISTRY_MACHINE_SAM. These files are copies of the five essential Registry files from the time of that restore point. Copy them to the Windows\System32\Config folder of the damaged copy of Windows.

Then move to the Windows\System32\Config folder of that damaged copy of Windows. For the next step you need to have booted from a different drive. Delete the five Registry files DEFAULT, SECURITY, SOFTWARE, SYSTEM and SAM. Once you have done this you can rename each of the five files you just copied to the corresponding Registry filename. This should restore the Registry to the state it was in when that restore point was made.

If you try to access the System Volume Information folder after attaching the hard disk to another Windows-based PC, you may find you do not have permission. This is because the folder may only have access rights defined for SYSTEM. In this case, you need to add access rights for Administrators.

If you are running Windows XP Professional Edition, first make sure Simple File Sharing is turned off. Then right-click on the System Volume Information folder and choose Sharing and Security. Click on the Security tab. In the top portion of this window, you'll see which users or groups have rights to access this folder.

If this shows just SYSTEM, you need to add an entry for Administrators. Click the Add button, type in Administrators, click on Check Names and then click OK. The lower window will show permissions for Administrators. Tick the Allow box next to Full Control and click Apply, then OK. Windows XP Home Edition users have to do this in Safe Mode; otherwise, the Security tab will not be available.



▲ Use copies of essential Registry files to fix a damaged system



Removing Wanadoo

Q I installed Wanadoo Pay as you Go on my desktop PC, but I have decided that I don't want it. However, I can't find any way of removing or uninstalling it as there is nothing listed in the Add/Remove Programs section of the Control Panel and no uninstall information appears when I click on any Wanadoo icon. How do I get rid of it?

R Conrad, rconradc@aol.com

A Quite a few Freeserve, Wanadoo and Orange customers ask this question. Essentially, Freeserve, Wanadoo and now Orange (different brands using the same service) don't install any complete new software applications. Instead they simply customise the ones you already have, adding toolbars and search options to Internet Explorer, for example.

The lack of a remove option makes uninstalling all these changes messy. Particularly annoying for most former Wanadoo customers is the advertising that appears. Such adware may be tolerable if you are getting a free service, but you don't want to pay for a service and still be subjected to adverts. Like many adware products, these Freeserve/Wanadoo/Orange adverts don't have any obvious uninstall option and continue even if you are using another internet service.

Luckily, removing the connection icon is easy. You should be able to go to Control Panel, Network Connections and simply delete any remaining connection entries for Wanadoo. Next we suggest that you download and run HijackThis!, which can scan and delete any further entries that mention Wanadoo. This will take care of Internet Explorer add-ons such as the homepage setting, default search page and add-on toolbars.

Many users find some versions of the adware bar that the Wanadoo installer adds to Outlook Express to be particularly annoying. To remove this you need to use the Registry Editor. If you delete only the keys mentioned here this should be safe, but it is always a good idea to create a System Restore point before editing the Registry just in case your finger slips and you delete more than you intended. To create a restore point select Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools, System Restore and choose the option to create a new restore point.

Once you have created a restore point, click on Start, Run, type in regedit and click OK. Then click on the plus signs to navigate to HKey_Current_User Identities, under which you will see one or more keys that look like folders with very long strings of hexadecimal characters as names. If you have more than one of these entries you will have to repeat this step for each of them.

Under each key select Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express/5.0 and then look for an entry called BodybarPath in the right-hand window. This will have a value pointing to the Freeserve/Wanadoo/Orange website. Highlight this entry and select Delete. While you are in RegEdit, look for an entry called WindowTitle and delete this too if it mentions Wanadoo. Sometimes the Registry entry that controls the title will be in a different place. If you can't find it, use RegEdit's search facility to look for the word Wanadoo and also scout around for any entries with a name similar to Window Title. These may occur either with or without the space in it.

To remove the Wanadoo branding from Internet Explorer, stay in RegEdit and navigate to HKey_Current_User/Software/Microsoft/Internet Explorer/Main/WindowTitle. Then highlight and delete this key.

Making a secure disk wipe

Q In *Helpfile, Shopper* December 2006 you say that formatting a disk does not wipe it securely. I thought that a full format (that is, not a quick format) rewrote the sectors on a disk. If it does, surely this is adequate for most people? If one is worried about someone recovering data from the residual magnetism, the safest solution is surely a large hammer.

John Thomas, john@thomasjr.freeserve.co.uk

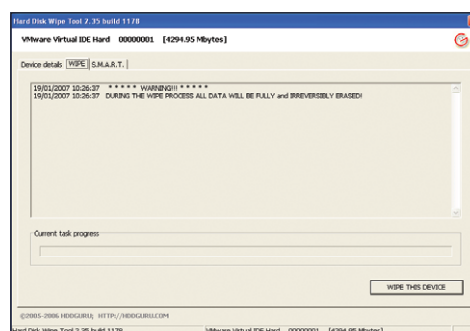
A It's true that when you format a floppy diskette, the format program writes to every sector on the diskette and so destroys the information on it, but when you format a hard disk, it does not do this. Instead, it writes only to areas of the disk used for essential system information. These include the Master Partition Record, Boot Sector and certain key directory and file allocation information. The main difference between a full format and a quick format is that a full format reads from a sample of sectors throughout the drive to verify that the size reported in the Master Partition Record is correct.

For the technically curious, format writes to the file allocation table and root directory on FAT32 drives. On NTFS it writes the volume allocation bitmap and root directory index and creates a new Master File Table, which usually overwrites the first six records of the old Master File table, including the information about where the rest

of the old Master File Table records were stored. None of the rest of the disk is written to.

Formatting a hard disk does not wipe it. It simply deletes the pointers to the information, while the actual data remains. The data may be hard to reconstruct completely but a data-recovery expert, or even an amateur with a few simple tools, could find fragments of text, graphics, internet history and so on.

Many programs advertise that they wipe drives securely to US Department of Defense standards, but this is unnecessary. For all practical purposes it is sufficient to overwrite data once, but you must use a low-level program that writes to every sector of the drive. The free tools from www.hddguru.com do this.



▲ Formatting a hard disk won't wipe out its data. The Hard Disk Wipe Tool utility will, though

Your experts

HELPFILE

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Paul Mullen

With 27 years of PC experience as a power user, programmer and IT consultant, Paul Mullen answers all PC problems, tackling hardware, system and security issues.



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SOFTWARE HELP

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Database developer and productivity expert Kay Ewbank offers help with office applications.



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BUYING HELP

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Labs Editor Tom Royal recommends the best products for your specific requirements.



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BUSINESS HELP

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Web developer and security expert Simon Edwards provides IT solutions to your business goals.



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Please try to give full details of your problem. We need an email address or daytime and evening telephone numbers in case we need more information.

Although the policy of *Computer Shopper* is not to publish readers' email addresses, we include them in Help so that other readers with experience of similar problems can share their solution (please also cc any comments to the relevant Help department above). If you would prefer not to have your email address published, please say so.

Unable to access certain webpages

Q I've never had a problem accessing any webpage before, but recently I have been unable to access any Microsoft websites, including the Windows Update sites and a few others. I can get to most sites, which load very quickly. I lost access to Microsoft's sites after buying a new Belkin G+ MIMO modem router. My previous modem router was also a Belkin and this caused no problems at all.

I have checked that my personal firewall is not blocking these sites. My broadband ISP is PlusNet and I have a reasonably well-specified system running Windows XP.

Pete Pritchard, pritchard@khc12.plus.com

A I doubt that your new router has anything to do with this problem. Routers don't treat websites selectively. The only parameter that could possibly account for problems with accessing just some sites would be the Maximum Transmission Unit (MTU) setting. This is the size of the largest packet you can send without fragmentation. The usual TCP/IP value is 1,500, but most DSL modems use PPPoE or PPPoA and need to use a few bytes per packet for housekeeping information. This means they need a lower MTU value of 1,492 to avoid packet fragmentation.

Although fragmented packets should still get through, they are more likely to be blocked by a misconfigured router, and this could prevent access to sites served by that router. Still, I doubt this is your problem.

It could be that the sites were busy when you tried to access them, or that your ISP had a problem with its routing to some sites. However, many virus and spyware programs deliberately block access to anti-spyware and internet security sites, including Windows Update.

A common method of doing this is to add entries to the Windows Hosts file. Hosts is a text file (with no .txt file extension) that is located in the Windows\System32\Drivers\Etc folder. Versions of Windows older than Windows 2000 and XP used the Windows folder. The Hosts file contains a list of internet host names, typically website addresses, and their related IP address.

Normally, when you try to access a website, the computer looks up the site's IP address using DNS servers on the internet. However, if Windows finds the website listed in Hosts it uses the IP address in the file and doesn't bother asking the DNS service for it. By editing the Hosts file you can divert requests for one website to another, which may be used to block access to a site.

Click on this file and choose to open it with Notepad to view its contents. By default it has some comment lines, which start with the # symbol. There should also be just one entry that reads 127.0.0.1 localhost.

Sometimes you will find that security programs have added entries to block known bad sites. For example, the program Spybot Search & Destroy has an immunise option that adds the names of many bad sites to your Hosts file and diverts requests for these sites to 127.0.0.1, which is a special IP address that points to your

own computer. This in effect prevents you visiting the real, harmful site. Some advert-blocking programs also use the Hosts file.

If your Hosts file contains a list of entries that mostly belong to anti-virus companies, such as Symantec.com, McAfee.com and so on, your computer has been infected by a virus or spyware. I suggest that you remove these entries, then reboot and press F8 to get a text menu of boot options. Choose Safe Mode with Networking. Check the Hosts file after rebooting and you may find that it has been changed back again. Hopefully, the software that's making the changes won't run in Safe Mode, so you should be able to remove the bad entries and reboot once again into Safe Mode with Networking. The Hosts file is read only on bootup, so changes won't take effect until you reboot.

If your Hosts file is not infected, the blocking may be happening because of a Winsock Layered Service Provider (LSP) filter driver. Or it may be that some sophisticated spyware has infected components of Internet Explorer. Recently I have come across quite a few sophisticated spyware applications that block certain sites without using the Hosts file. You would need to use anti-spyware software to detect these.

As these sophisticated spyware programs may use rootkit techniques to hide themselves, you should reboot into Safe Mode with Networking before scanning. Hopefully, you will be able to access and get updates from anti-virus and anti-spyware sites in this mode. Otherwise you may need to scan your hard disk using another computer.

Feedback LCD screens can suffer burn-in

✉ I read with interest in *Helpfile, Shopper* February 2007 that you provide a method of disabling the screensaver with a Registry hack and say that LCD screens don't suffer from screen burn. I work for a large government organisation and we are now using Fujitsu desktops and LCD screens. We thought that using LCDs would solve a problem we were having with screen burn on our CRT monitors.

However, the problem is now even worse with the LCDs. Fujitsu says this is image retention, but an image is burnt into the screen and it does not go away. We have tried many of the recommended options, such as cycling full-screen colours and so on, with little or no improvement. The problem has actually happened more quickly on the LCD monitors than it did on the CRTs we had, and is not covered by the warranty.

Tony Porter, tonypor14@tiscali.co.uk

A Thank you for the correction. Technically, it is true that LCD monitors don't suffer the same problem as CRTs. The problem with CRT monitors is that long-term bombardment by cathode rays burns the screen phosphor, after which the burned image cannot not be erased. Burn-in is most noticeable when your systems

always run the same application and typically have the same interface displayed. I have seen CRT screens where a text menu was clearly visible even when the computer was turned off.

Unfortunately, a similar problem with LCD screens can be just as bad, or even worse. In a liquid crystal screen the crystals change shape when a voltage is applied to them and, if left in the same state for too long, can become stuck in that position. LCD makers call this "image persistence". I suppose I hadn't come across it before as most users use white backgrounds these days and screen contents usually change frequently. Image persistence on an LCD screen can be reversed by displaying a white screen or reversing the colours in the image that caused the problem.

Thanks also to reader Darrin Maunders who pointed out my mistake and recommended the following article on the subject: <http://compreviews.about.com/od/monitors/a/LCDBurnIn.htm>.

The problem is much worse when computers always run the same application, particularly if it still uses text-mode menus. Home users may never see the problem. If you are worried, you could use a screensaver, preferably an animated one that is always moving around the screen. Alternatively, you can use Windows power management to turn off the signal to the monitor after a few minutes of inactivity.

If possible, it's better to design any in-house applications that almost always display the same menu to display it in a slightly different position each time, and perhaps arm them with their own built-in screensavers that blank the menu after a couple of minutes of inactivity. Some high-end graphics cards, such as the Pixel Perfect GC-K2P-64, come with their own software that moves the image around to avoid image-retention problems.



▲ LCD screens can suffer from image persistence, but it's not permanent

Windows 98 driver needed for USB flash drive

Q I am having great difficulty finding a Windows 98 SE driver for my USB 1.1/2.0 500MB flash disk, which was made in China. I have tried several driver sites, but with no success.

David Stone, ldavidstone@merseyrail.com

A While Windows XP incorporates generic drivers that work with almost all USB storage devices, Windows 98 requires the user to load a driver for each device. The driver you need depends on the chipset in the USB storage device. If your device is one of those very anonymous ones, which are typically sold under a wide variety of different brand names, it will usually come with a generic driver written by the chipset provider. If no driver came with the device and you can't find the maker's website, you are stuck.

When you plug in the flash drive and wait for Windows to recognise it, you should get a screen identifying the device. How is it described? After that, the Windows new hardware wizard attempts to find a driver and, as Windows 98 doesn't have drivers for USB storage drives, this will fail unless you put in a CD or give it a source.

Once you get the message "Windows has not installed a driver for this device", click Finish, then right-click on My Computer, select

Properties and then click the Device Manager tab. You will see an entry under Other Devices with a question mark against it. Note the name shown (if any). Unfortunately, the Windows 98 Device Manager does not give any other useful information.

To identify your device, click Start, Run and type regedit, then click OK. The Registry Editor will open. Click on the plus signs to navigate to HKey_Local_Machine/Enum/USB. Under this you will see a series of keys starting with VID, each of which corresponds to a device that has, at some time or another, been plugged into your computer's USB port. Each of these keys will have a name composed of the Vendor Id and device Id. An example entry will look something like this: VID_1065&PID_2136. This is the string that the USB device sends to the USB controller when it is first plugged in, and which is used to identify the correct driver.

The Vendor ID code (following VID) identifies the chipset maker and is a good starting point in identifying the correct driver. In the above example you could search Google for USB vendor 1065. This comes up with CCYU Technology and, under that, device id 2136 is identified as an Easydisk 1064. Perhaps you will find a driver by this means.

Although Microsoft supplied generic USB storage device drivers for Windows Me and



◀ Finding drivers for anonymous USB drives is a challenge

above, it did not go back and release generic drivers for Windows 98. The Me drivers won't work with 98 because Microsoft changed the format of device drivers between the two versions of Windows. However, a German programmer calling himself Maximus Decim has released a generic USB storage driver for Windows 98 SE that works with a wide variety of USB storage devices. No homepage is given and there is no support, but many users have found that they work.

Windows 95 and the first release of Windows 98 had issues with USB, which makes it hard to use generic drivers. There is no guarantee that the generic driver will work with all USB devices and no warranty is given, but it's worth trying. Download it from www.technical-assistance.co.uk/kb/usbmsd98.php. Before you install it, remove all other drivers for USB storage devices because different drivers can conflict with each other.

Although unsupported, the Maximus Decim driver works surprisingly well. In fact, I have used it in place of maker-specific drivers because, often, if you install two different USB devices on a Windows 98 system, the manufacturers' own drivers conflict. Removing all USB storage drivers and installing this one has cured this problem.

Synchronising file folders

Q I'm a retired photographer and am in the process of scanning, retouching and saving to disk all my old family photographs and colour transparencies (and those of my parents) going back to the 1920s. The high-resolution scans, which are in TIFF and JPEG format, are saved to an internal hard disk and ordered by original date into folders and subfolders, such as 1930s, 1940s and so on.

They are regularly copied to a second external hard disk. It is an ongoing process that involves many hundreds of photographs and inevitably, due to interruptions, some files are not copied to the second disk. I occasionally compare the contents of each pair of folders and copy any missing files manually, but it is time-consuming and I am worried that I may still miss some.

Is there some kind of utility I could use to compare and synchronise the folders' contents automatically? I know I could use an incremental backup program but I also use the external drive with my notebook and I want to be able to open or view the thumbnails without restoring them. I am still using Windows Me and will probably not update until Windows Vista is well established.

Geoff Massey, geoff@geomas.co.uk

A There are plenty of backup programs, such as Fileback-PC from www.fileback-pc.com, that you can

use to copy files without compression and without using a special file format. However, I think your best solution is to use a batch command file. Windows has a command line program called xcopy that can compare the contents of two folders and copy the missing or changed files. Here is an example of the command you would need to copy files from a folder called C:\MyPics to a folder called E:\Backup MyPics. Obviously you will have to change the folder names:

```
xcopy /s /d C:\MyPics "E:\Backup
MyPics"
```

Folder names can be in upper or lower case (it doesn't matter) but if the folder name contains a space or other special characters, you need to put quote marks around the folder name. The /s option tells xcopy to copy files in all folders beneath the folder specified. It will create corresponding folders on the destination drive if needed. The /d option tells it to skip copying if the destination already contains a file of that name with the same or a more recent date-modified value. That way it will copy only new or modified files.

The xcopy command has many more options. Another option you might use rather than /d is /m. This uses a flag called the archive bit. Windows sets this flag every time you create or modify a file. The /m option copies only those files that have the archive bit set and then resets this bit afterwards. Many other backup programs

also use and reset the archive bit, so if you use other backup programs as well, they may conflict with xcopy.

You could simply type in the command every time you want to use it, but an easier solution is to create a batch file. Click on Start, Programs Accessories and then MSDOS Prompt to get a command line. Alternatively, click on Start, Run and type in command, then click OK. Windows 2000 or XP users can just type cmd. This opens a black command prompt window. Into that window type:

```
cd desktop
```

and press Enter. This should change the current folder to Windows\Desktop. Now type:

```
copy con: copypics.bat
```

and press Enter. The cursor will move to a new line. Then type:

```
xcopy /s /d C:\MyPics "E:\Backup
MyPics"&
pause&
```

Press Enter after each line and, when finished, press Ctrl-Z. The system should reply "1 file copied". It will have created a new file called copypics.bat. If it created this in your Desktop folder, you should see an icon for it on the desktop. Double-click that icon whenever you want to copy new pictures to your external drive. ☺

Proxy server causes problem with Sky Anytime

Q I've been using Firefox for over a year now and am quite happy with it. I wanted to download Sky Anytime to my PC to see sports highlights and so on. It required Internet Explorer so I downloaded Internet Explorer 7 and Windows Media Player 11 plus all the bells and whistles. I also opened the required network ports and it all worked – once. The next and subsequent times I booted up and tried, I faced a fixed screen with no options. I phoned the Sky Anytime helpline and they told me that my problem was a proxy server.

Not having a clue what that was, I searched for help online and I'm still not sure I know what it is. Anyway, in the Internet Options menu from the Control Panel I found LAN Settings and found that a box called Use Proxy Server was ticked, so I unticked it. The Apply button was greyed out, but it seemed to work.

When I boot up my PC I have the same problem again and, when I look at the LAN Settings, the Use Proxy Server box is ticked again. The only way I can use Sky Anytime on the PC is to untick the box every time. Have you any idea why the Apply button is grey and, if this is the root of my problem, how do I resolve it please?

David Brindley,
david.brindley2@btopenworld.com

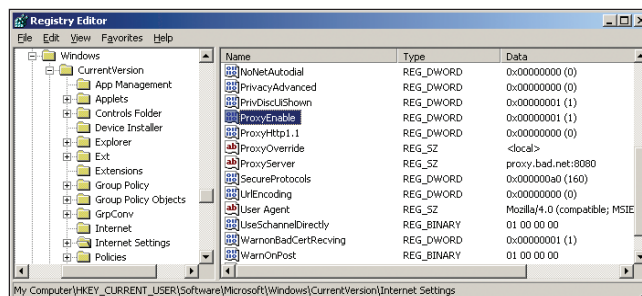
A A proxy server is a computer on the internet that takes user requests for webpages, collects the pages from the target website and delivers the results back to the requesting computer.

Originally, proxy servers were used only in offices where the IT department wanted to monitor and control internet use. They would prevent direct access to the internet from their local network and instead set up a proxy server. The workstations would be set so that

whenever a user tried to access a website their browser would ask the proxy server for the page rather than trying to contact the site directly. The proxy server could then log web use, check for viruses, block access to prohibited websites and also store recent webpages in a cache so that if several users asked for the same page the server needed to fetch it only once.

There are several reasons why your computer may have been configured to use a proxy server. Some internet providers set up proxy servers to reduce traffic and, if you downloaded a customised version of Internet Explorer 7, this may have been preset. Some internet security programs are set up as proxy servers running on your own computer so that they can scan webpages for potential problems. Spyware may also set up a proxy server on your computer in order to see which websites you try to access and send you related advertising from its own sponsors.

Check the proxy server address, as this may give you a clue as to who set it up. If the proxy server settings in Internet Options give the name of a server, you can see who owns it. If it is an IP address, pinging that IP address will usually tell you its name, or else you can do a reverse DNS lookup on the IP address at www.dnsstuff.com. If the address of the proxy server is shown as 127.0.0.1 or localhost, this means the proxy server is a piece of software running on your own computer. If that's the case, you can see which process it is by opening a command prompt (Start, Run and type cmd) and then using the command netstat -a. This will display a list of open ports. The proxy server will



▲ You can disable the proxy settings in the Registry

normally run on port 80 unless a different port was defined in the proxy server settings.

The proxy server settings are in the LAN Settings window, which you reach through the LAN Settings button on the Internet Options Connection tab. This window doesn't have an Apply button – changes take place when you click OK. It is normal for the Apply button on the Connections tab to be greyed out unless you change a setting on that window. That is not what is causing the proxy server to reset on each reboot. I suspect that some other process keeps changing back your proxy server. Hopefully it is some internet security process or some policy installed by your internet provider. If not, you should search for spyware.

Even if you can't change the proxy server permanently using Control Panel, you may be able to change it using the Registry Editor. Click on Start, Run, type regedit and then navigate to HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Internet Settings. You will see a value on the right called ProxyEnable. Set this to zero to disable the proxy server. There is no need to change the Proxyserver value, which gives the location of the proxy server, as it won't be used unless ProxyEnable has a value of 1. Once you have done this, export the setting to a .reg file. If your setting ever gets reversed you can reinstate it by double-clicking the .reg file.

Can I use my computers in the USA?

Q I am moving to America in a couple of months, and I would like to know if I can use my computers on their power supply when I get there. I own a notebook that has an AC adaptor, supplied with a lead with an English plug on the end of it. Can I buy a lead with an American plug on the end, plug it into the adaptor and use it in America?

Ryan Fitton, ryan.fitton@hotmail.co.uk

A The US and Canada use 120V AC supplies at 60Hz, while the UK uses 240V at 50Hz. Check the AC adaptor supplied with your notebook to see what it can support. Most notebook power supplies can run on a wide range of input voltages without adaptation. If the mains cord detaches from the AC adaptor, it almost certainly uses a standard connector and you can buy a mains cord with a similar connector on one end and a US AC plug on the other from a Walmart or

Radio Shack store. If you have a Dell or IBM (now Lenovo) notebook computer, the adaptor may use a more unusual connector and you might need to buy the correct cord from a computer store.

Almost all desktop computers have an input voltage switch on the power supply. This is usually red, and you can switch it to suit US voltages. The power lead connector is again standard and US leads are easy to find. Unfortunately, most monitors don't have a voltage selector switch, and are more likely to be troubled by the different AC frequency, so you may not want to take a monitor with you. LCD monitors often have an external adaptor but, unlike most notebook computers, these usually don't accept a wide

range of voltages so would not work. Anyway, desktop PCs are usually too bulky and heavy to take with you so it may be better to buy one there. As we went to press the pound was worth \$1.95 and, at this exchange rate, most computer equipment is far cheaper in the USA.



▲ Some power supply units have a red switch on the back that enables them to work in the US



Email full of undelivered, unknown messages

Q Since the start of 2007, my email inbox has been full of spam email with variations of "undelivered mail" or "out of office" headers. All these messages have my correct address but begin with a random set of characters, for example: unzc@myemail.freemove.co.uk. Can I set up my account so that it accepts only properly addressed emails? I'm sure I'm not the only reader being plagued by this spam.

Thomas Jackson,
thomas@jockdock99.freemove.co.uk

A What you are seeing is not spam but automatic responses to spam that someone has sent using a variant of your email address as the From: address. This has been an extremely popular technique with spammers recently. They don't want to be bothered by non-delivery messages, so they use a fake From: field.

At one time they made up domain names but now many mail services reject email messages with an invalid domain in the From: field. Many spammers use software that picks the domain name part of the email address used at random from a list and adds a randomly generated username to it.

For most people, the part of their email address after the @ sign is the domain name, which is usually that of their internet service provider. The part before the @ sign is the username. In those cases any replies would be addressed to a non-existent mailbox and usually discarded. However, several UK internet services, including Freemove (which became Wanadoo and is now Orange) decided that it

would be a clever idea to put the username after the @ sign and allow the user to put anything they wanted before it. The part before the @ sign is ignored and all mail with your username after the @ sign is delivered to your mailbox.

This was great at first because users could invent a different name whenever they gave their email address to a website. Then, if any of those variants started receiving spam, they could block emails sent to that particular variant. I used to recommend that users who had registered their own domains do this too. Then spammers started taking a known domain name and sending the same spam to dozens of common usernames at that domain. So I now suggest that domain owners reject all mail not addressed to a known user, although you should also set up rules to allow through common misspellings.

Unfortunately, with Freemove/Wanadoo/Orange I don't think there is an easy way to filter out unused names. If spam is being sent to a particular user, you can set up a filter in webmail to delete it. However, it is much trickier to set up a filter to delete mail sent to randomly generated usernames.

You can't simply filter all email that doesn't have your name in the to: field as your username might be in the cc: field or, if the message was a bulk mail or a BCC list, your address might not be in the message at all, but will be in the SMTP envelope only. This is delivery information that is stripped off before you receive the email.

So, if you accept only messages that have your address in the To: field you will miss much of your mail. Some internet providers add a non-standard header such as X-envelope-To: or Delivered-To: to indicate the address on the

envelope. It might be possible to filter according to this line but that is starting to get very tricky. If any reader knows how to set up Freemove/Wanadoo/Orange accounts to accept only certain usernames, please let us know.

There is another spam-related problem with Freemove/Wanadoo/Orange email accounts. Many users have been finding that email they send to friends is being returned undelivered or, worse, is being discarded without warning. This is because accounts with these services have been popular with spammers. As a result, a lot of spam originates from Freemove/Orange mail servers and these servers regularly appear on the lists of known spam sources maintained by organisations such as SpamCop.

Unfortunately, although SpamCop recommends that its lists be used only as part of a process to flag mail as possible spam, many ISPs that are trying to reduce the volume of spam have chosen to reject all mail sent through listed servers. That means many legitimate emails are being rejected.

While the real problem is with internet service providers who reject the mail instead of simply flagging it as possible spam, it is hard to blame them when spam makes up more than 85 per cent of all email. Unless Freemove/Orange makes much greater efforts to stop spammers using their services it is likely that their servers will keep appearing on these blacklists from time to time.

I recommend that readers switch to a different email service. If you purchase your own domain name, you can set up an email service through it and you'll never need to change your email address again.

Slow connection after failed IE7 installation

Q I have a Tiny PC running Windows XP with SP2, and I have four dial-up pay-as-you-go internet accounts with different ISPs: Freemove/Orange, FreeBeeb, Madasafish and Supanet.

I recently downloaded and installed the Internet Explorer 7 upgrade but the installation ended with an error message saying that it couldn't install and referring me to the Microsoft Windows Update page. On checking the Internet Explorer About page, I found that it identified itself as Internet Explorer 7 but none of the new features seemed to be there.

More importantly, since then I have had problems connecting to any of my dial-up accounts. Most of them time out and, if they do connect, the speed reported by the connection icon is greatly reduced from the usual 40-44Kbit/s to around 9-21Kbit/s, depending on the ISP.

I uninstalled the upgrade, reverting to Internet Explorer 6, but the connection problems continue. I have even tried to use System Restore to return the system to the way it was before the upgrade but this hasn't solved the problem. Coincidentally, on the night of the installation we had a severe

thunderstorm and while I don't think the house was struck, I know that storms can affect a modem.

I think that Windows XP downloaded some other security upgrades on the day I downloaded Internet Explorer 7. Windows System Restore lists Internet Explorer 7, Windows IDN Mitigation APIs, Windows NLS Downlevel Mapping, Software Distribution Service 2.0 and XP KB915865 as being installed on the same day.

I checked the modem but the diagnostic tool claims that it is working OK, and the device status window also states that it is working properly. Can you please tell me how I can regain my usual connection speeds and reliable connections to my ISPs? I am not bothered about getting Internet Explorer 7 to work as I generally use Firefox for working on the internet. I would prefer not to have to reinstall Windows XP as I have only a restore CD and have not had occasion to use it yet.

John M Peters,
jmp@johnmpeters.madasafish.com

A I think the failed Internet Explorer 7 installation is irrelevant to your dial-up problems, although it may share some

common cause with the slowing down of the connections. If the dial-up connector icon is reporting a reduced speed, this is the speed at which the modem is connecting. A reduced speed can only be due to a bad phone line, or problems caused by other equipment on the line. Alternatively, a bad modem driver could cause a similar problem, although this is unlikely in your situation unless you selected the Custom Windows Update option and then downloaded a driver update for the modem.

Check your Windows Update download history again to see if you managed to download a new modem driver. If you did, you can try reverting to the previous driver. Otherwise, it is probably a line problem or possibly the modem itself going bad. Thunderstorms can kill a modem, but occasionally they can damage it sufficiently that it connects only at reduced speed. However, I think it's more likely that water got into an underground phone cable during the storm.

Make sure the problem is not caused by other equipment attached to your phone line by disconnecting everything else in the house and connecting your modem directly to the test jack on your BT master socket if you can. If you still have problems, ask BT to check your line. 